

Design Corner: Starting Out Small From Spray Park to Comprehensive Aquatics Complex

By Tom LaLonde

Facing not-uncommon budget constraints, public park and recreation leaders might wish to consider a phased approach to creating an aquatics facility that offers some amenities sooner, with more offerings to come online later, as resources permit. In formulating an extended effort to achieve full and inclusive aquatics objectives for a community, we recommend developing a comprehensive master plan that includes the ultimate build-out of a site. From this, a cost estimate can be created and priorities identified in phases that meet the budgetary goals.

Today's outdoor public aquatics complexes tend to be sophisticated affairs that can include a complex combination of components, from zero-edge activity, lap and children's pools; to spray-play equipment and sand-play areas; to lazy rivers and sun/shade decks; to drop slides hooked up to diving/deep water apparatuses; and combinations of body flume and inner tube slides—not to mention support facilities, such as bathhouses, filter buildings and concession areas.

The current price tag for a typical configuration at an outdoor complex serving a medium-sized community can run from about \$5 million to more than \$10 million. Communities looking to build a new aquatics facility or replace an aging pool might find it especially difficult in these economic times to swallow the cost of building a complex from "A to Z" all at once—or even in a relatively short time period. For park and recreation agencies that serve such communities, an incremental approach to building a comprehensive aquatics complex might make for a sensible option.

By starting with a smaller component—such as a spray park—and expanding on a site according to a plan conceived to meet activity, population and budget goals, a full-blown facility can be secured on a "pay-as-you-go" basis. In determining an incremental, or phased, approach to move from modest to magnificent, a public park and recreation agency should know what kind of growth the community anticipates—as well as what kinds of funding it may expect down the road.

What Is Wanted or Needed ?

Substantial experience in designing public aquatics facilities has provided us with a strong direction for eliciting key information that can help us, in turn, assist communities with building a solid approach to making needs projections as they think through a course for expanding/evolving aquatics facilities. Here are some steps:



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* Perform a community survey to determine what the community prefers and would support funding.

* Involve a focused citizens advisory group that represents different factions in the community, such as leisure swimming and competitive swimming, tots, teens, adults and seniors.

* Look toward national trends to determine what elements are well received and can support revenue projections.

* Examine the demographics of the community in an effort to match facilities with age groups, interests and so on. Residents of a district with a large graying population, for example, would not likely clamor for a deep hopper, but rather would likely prefer a therapy or lap pool. Splash Pad as 'Launch Pad'

How have some park and recreation agencies managed challenges by conceiving solutions to accommodate identified aquatics "wants and needs" and budget constraints? Through an approach defined by a plan for a progression of improvements. The Mundelein Park District in Mundelein, Ill., for example, built a 50,600-square-foot splash pad facility, which was intended to be a springboard for a more elaborate aquatics complex.

Beginning with a project that came in at a cost just exceeding \$1 million, the agency—using state grant money to help finance the project—was able to provide a new facility for the community sooner, and follow through with a plan to redevelop it into a larger, modern attraction later when funds became available, replacing an aging pool with a new aquatics facility on the same site. In this agency's case, the initial phase to move to new aquatics facility offerings was augmented with the construction of an indoor lap pool at a community center to provide aquatics opportunities identified as being important to swimmers in the district.

The new spray play facility that was built outdoors features a 2,500-square-foot pavilion with a picnic area and vending machines. Amenities include tot and youth water play areas—each comprising 1,500 square feet, a sand play area, volleyball courts, shade structures and a sun hill. Ornamental stairs connect the outdoor spray play to the existing pool, and a support building with a covered picnic area adjacent to a connective path between the two facilities.

Envisioned in a master plan developed for the site was a series of expansion initiatives to materialize through a multi-phased development strategy. Expansion of the aquatics facility portion of this extensive recreation site, which also features the community center, called for the construction of a plunge pool, a zero-edge-depth pool, a lazy river and support structures.



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Thinking Big, Starting Small

Not far away, in St. Charles, Ill., the park district has embarked on an ambitious plan for what is to be the Campton Hills Aquatics Center, a Greenfield facility envisioned to contain an assembly of amenities that the district anticipates will appeal to the expanding community it serves. The roadmap to get to the realization of this new, multi-featured outdoor complex also involves a phased approach, which began with the construction of a spray-park component that opened in 2005.

Completed at a cost of \$1.3 million, the 40,000-square-foot "splash" playground represents the first phase of a two-phase plan for the aquatic complex on the chosen park site, which is expected to eventually hold a multi-acre aquatic center that can accommodate 1,750 bathers, as well as encompassing efforts to build a nature center and a community center through an additional phase. With completion of the aquatic center expected in time for the opening of the 2010 outdoor pool season in Illinois, work is now under way to design and construct the \$11 million facility.

Features of the aquatic complex being developed are to include a zero-depth-entry activity pool with a separate eight-lane, 25-yard lap pool; a zero-depth-entry children's pool; and a plunge pool rigged out with a slide tower and body flume slide. A 560-foot-long lazy river with a zero-depth entry and a 100-foot-long "rapids ride" component is also planned, as is a bathhouse with administration space; a concessions/filter building housing storage space; and a concession deck with adjacent rental lawns.

This pool is being constructed on the west side of the community where most of the new housing has been developed over the past 10 years. Once this project is complete, the existing Pottawatomie pool on the east side of town will be reconstructed and reopened 2011. Both pool initiatives and the nature center were part of a successful 2008 referendum.

The entire site is being developed over a 10- to 15-year period based on an overall master plan that includes ballfields, parking, roadways and detention (already completed), the sprayground, the aquatic center, nature center and a future community center that will require a future referendum.

Prudent Planning

Ascertaining and outlining budget and program projections are essential to embarking on a logical aquatics complex development project. Having a good idea of where your community will be 10, 20 or more years down the road is important in planning what facilities to build—and the rate at which it makes sense to build them. The size and selection of components will depend on a community's interests and demographics.



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Regardless of the path and timeframe for building an aquatics facility through a phased approach, solid planning for a sound progression of amenity development is key to achieving efficiencies. A park agency, for example, should make it a point to work closely with the city or village that its district covers to ensure that all municipal requirements have been considered as the project is implemented—an important factor to avoid time delays and costly changes.

When focusing on specific configuration and components in a gradual approach, "starting out small" would generally begin with spraygrounds, moving to a zero-entry activity pool, then build from there. Regardless of the number of components or their arrangement, a successful project requires good, early planning—and the ability be flexible especially if an aquatics complex construction plan is to be implemented over a number of years.

Written For Recreation Management . . .

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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